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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK  
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USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAUDI AMBASSADOR ON SYRIA, HIZBALLAH, SAAD

REF: A. BEIRUT 129  
[1](#)B. 08 BEIRUT 1468

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja told the Ambassador that Saudi King Abdullah's outreach to Syrian President Bashar Asad was necessary to limit Iran's influence in the Arab world. Bashar, for his part, is playing all sides off each other, but that strategy would only be viable for a short time, Khoja assessed. Saudi Arabia was anxious to have the Arab countries present a united front at the next Arab League summit, scheduled in late March.

[1](#)2. (C) Iran, Hizballah, and Israel are the unpredictable actors, especially in Lebanon, he said. Khoja called the period from now until Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections "unstable," but was mildly optimistic that Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition could win the elections, barring "something bad" happening, such as political assassinations or violence in the Palestinian refugee camps. He informed the Ambassador that MP Michel Murr and his allies, the Armenian Tashnaq, would surely deliver all eight seats in the Metn (one of several contentious Christian districts) to March 14, which is not consistent with what others have told us. According to Khoja, Hariri "really wants to become Prime Minister" and would accept the position, if offered by the opposition, should March 14 lose in the elections. End summary.

SYRIA SHOULD COME BACK  
TO THE ARAB FOLD  
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[1](#)3. (C) Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja told the Ambassador February 2 that Saudi King Abdullah had reached out to Syrian President Bashar Asad to bring Syria "back to the Arab world" and keep Iran out. The Saudi leadership believed it "helped" Syria by proposing reconciliation at a recent summit in Kuwait, but "we still have work to do," Khoja said, to ensure Syria would make the "right choice, and quickly." Khoja surmised that the U.S. and Europe would support such action in the short term, but said Asad would need to show that he has a clear vision of how to approach difficult issues, such as what Syria would do about Hizballah, Hamas, terrorism, and Israel, if Asad hoped to get anywhere with the new U.S. administration.

[1](#)4. (C) Khoja said the Saudi leadership "does not trust" Asad. He implied that Asad was trying to play all sides against each other, for Syria's benefit, a similar sentiment to what other interlocutors have told us (Ref A). As an example, he pointed to Asad's close advisor and former Syrian intelligence chief Mohammad Abu Wael Nassif's alleged recent visit to Iran, on Asad's instruction, for consultations. However, Khoja declared it was important for Arab countries to remain united, especially at the next Arab League summit in March. He expressed concern that Qatar was also "playing a dirty game," but the Saudis did not know why. Despite Lebanese President Michel Sleiman's efforts, Khoja said Sleiman could not play an effective role as mediator between Syria and the other Arab states because the Lebanese-Syrian relationship remained "imbalanced." "Syria does not consider Lebanon an equal country," he said.

REGIONAL WILDCARDS: IRAN,  
HIZBALLAH, AND ISRAEL  
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[1](#)5. (C) Khoja accused Iran of "destroying" the internal political situation in Arab countries. Referencing the

December/January Gaza conflict, Khoja called Israel's actions "shameful," but implied that Hamas was pushed to engage in the conflict by Iran. He was not certain whether Hizballah wanted the Gaza conflict to escalate, but alleged that Iran held all the control. Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, Khoja

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continued, miscalculated by verbally attacking Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the conflict, as the Egyptian people rallied behind Mubarak instead. Khoja said this demonstrated Nasrallah was losing credibility, and believed this could push Hizballah to take any action, at any time, if it felt threatened. He reported that the Saudis' concerns about their safety in Lebanon were heightened after Nasrallah's attack on Mubarak.

16. (C) The Saudi Ambassador worried that regional conflicts could spill into Lebanon from now until the June 7 parliamentary elections. Calling the current time period "unstable," he said anything was possible if Hizballah received orders from Iran, including the threat of assassinations of political figures or incitement of an intifada in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps. (Note: In a separate conversation later the same day, Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Kahwagi told the Ambassador he was also very concerned about potential trouble in the camps, especially Ain el-Hilwe. End note.) Khoja said he had heard rumors that March 14 leaders Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces) and Walid Jumblatt (Druze), as well as MP Boutros Harb were all warned of security threats against them. (Note: Indeed all three March 14 figures have relayed concerns about their personal security to us, as well. End note.)

17. (C) On Israel, he worried that Israel may reenter Gaza or open a conflict with south Lebanon. He was especially afraid, he said, of the next few days prior to the Israeli election on February 10. A win for Benjamin Netanyahu would be "good for Syria, but bad for the Palestinians," he said, because of Israeli border interests. Khoja said Saudi Arabia's interest in Lebanon is that it remain stable. If Lebanon and Syria were stable, then Saudi Arabia would be stable, he argued.

KHOJA: "MARCH 14 WILL WIN,  
DEFINITELY, INSHALLAH" AND  
"SAAD REALLY WANTS TO BE PM"  
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18. (C) Although Hariri and Jumblatt had both met with Hizballah representatives, separately, to discuss security concerns, Khoja was disturbed that Jumblatt settled for meeting Hizballah MP Mohammad Raad January 21, instead of Nasrallah himself. "If you are leader, then you should meet with the leader," he said. However, Khoja said "definitely, in'shallah" Hariri's March 14 coalition would win Lebanon's parliamentary elections. He was confident that independent, Greek Orthodox MP Michel Murr would join Hariri's candidate list in the contentious Metn district, bringing the Armenian vote and delivering all eight parliamentary seats to March 14 there. Khoja affirmed that he met with Murr regularly, and assured the Ambassador that Murr was on "our side," as well as the Armenian Tashnaq party.

19. (C) It would not be the end of the world if the opposition won the elections, Khoja said, but it would be a symbolic defeat that would imply, "Iran won." The Ambassador urged Khoja to continue to use his influence with March 14's leadership, directly and indirectly, to encourage them in developing a winning program and candidate lists. The Ambassador inquired about rumors she heard that Saad Hariri planned to join a national unity government as PM, even if the opposition wins the elections. Khoja admitted that the Saudis had already counseled Hariri against doing so, arguing it would be better for Hariri to "let them (the opposition) fail" and not take the blame for their mistakes. However, he continued, Hariri "really wants to become Prime Minister," and speculated that Hariri would take the job, if offered, even in a government where the current opposition was in the majority.

110. (C) Separately, a Tripoli MP from Hariri's Future Movement claimed that the Saudis have been promoting a deal to distribute the eight parliamentary seats in Tripoli equally among candidates of four Sunni leaders: Hariri, his March 14 partner Mohammed Safadi, former PM Najib Mikati and Omar Karame. If this succeeded, March 14 would lose four of its current eight seats in Tripoli. The same day, deputy SYG

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of the Islamic party Jemaah Islamiya (not currently represented in the government) announced an initial agreement with the Future Movement to partner in the elections. In addition, the announcement named six of its members running in the parliamentary elections for Sunni seats in Beirut, Tripoli, Danniye, Sidon, and West Bekaa districts. Privately, Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury told us Hariri would likely offer Jemaah Islamiya one seat on his candidate list, either in Beirut or in Akkar, a district in north Lebanon.

COMMENT

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11. (C) We have consistently heard that Michel Murr would align with March 14 for the election, but Khoja's comments that Murr would be able to bring his political partner, the Armenian Tashnaq party, to the March 14 fold contradicts our other sources. Armenian Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradunian continues to say Tashnaq will support Murr himself for election no matter where Murr positions himself, but otherwise the party plans to support candidates of opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun. Also, Saad Hariri has so far rejected Tashnaq's overtures, saying he does not trust the party to stay loyal to March 14. However, we would not rule out the possibility that Khoja's confidence about Michel Murr and Tashnaq reflects that there is a Saudi-financed payoff in the works. The Ambassador will follow up on these themes in meetings with Murr and Pakradunian, and the DCM with Aounist MP Ibrahim Kanaan, this week.

12. (C) Saad Hariri's reported desire to become Prime Minister even in an opposition-led government -- if true -- would be troubling. Although some Sunni interlocutors would view it as only right that Lebanon's most prominent Sunni take the Sunni PM office, no matter which side won, we assess that such a move under this scenario could damage March 14's credibility and strength for future elections. It would also allow a new government dominated by the current opposition to let Hariri take the blame for mistakes or unpopular decisions, weakening his stature. End comment.

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